1: Nadel E-5 (1934-1936) 1942
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CHAPTER I
ENVIRONMENT

THE COUNTRY

131 THE people who call themselves Nupe live in the heart of Nigeria, in the low basin that is formed by the valleys of the two rivers Niger and Kaduna, between 9° 30′ and 8° 30′ N.L. A line drawn from Leaba, on the Niger, eastward to Kataeregi marks the northern boundary of Nupe land, another line drawn eastward from Shari (or Tsaragi) to Abugi and on to the Niger south of Baro the southern boundary. The Niger, flowing almost straight north–south between Leaba and Jebba, divides Nupe country from Yoruba in the west; the slowly rising country, east of Lapai and Gidi, sloping upward towards the hills of Gbari country, forms the eastern boundary of Nupe.

133 It is a low-lying, softly undulating country, not more than 200 feet above sea-level in most parts. A few low ridges of broken, rocky hills stretch out, rib-like, from the river valleys, and curiously symmetrical flat-topped hillocks rise abruptly here and there from the plain. The highest points are no more than 800 feet above sea-level. At Jebba the Niger forces its way through a narrow passage formed by rocks, the ragged end of a short, broken chain of hills. Farther south, at Kpatagbá and Baro, and above Yankyedya in the north, hills and rocks close in upon the river. Rabá, the ancient river capital of Nupe kingdom, stands on high cliffs of red sandstone. Between cliffs and rocks the river bed is bordered by low banks on which stretches of thick rain-forest alternate with shrub and low bush. During the rains both forest-covered banks and open bush are flooded far inland and turned into vast swamps; the level of the Kaduna at Wuya rises by 30 feet; and in the Niger valley villages which lie on high ground in the dry season have the water of the river washing the threshold of their houses. Part of Jebba Island is flooded every year; and Nupeko, near the confluence of Niger and Kaduna, about two miles from the river in the dry season, can be reached only by canoe in the rains.

The big rivers Niger and Kaduna form the two axes of the country, an efficient, natural system of communication. It is no accident that the early Nupe kingdom grew in the area near the confluence of the two rivers, which were its first high-roads as well as its natural boundaries. A net of smaller rivers and creeks, rich in fish, covers the country, providing an efficient system of natural irrigation. In most parts of Nupe 134 land the soil is rich and fertile, especially in the thinly inhabited districts west of the Kaduna, the only part of Nupe which still possesses large areas of virgin forest. East of the Kaduna, especially round Bida, a dense population and intensive cultivation have reduced the fertility of the land. It is the typical soil of Northern Nigeria, red earth mixed with laterite and rich in silicates—a fact which becomes important for the native glass industry in Bida. In a few districts, round Sakpe and near

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134 Lemu, pure white sand is found, a much more fertile soil as far as I can judge, which makes the country in the eyes of the native 'more beautiful' —by which he really means 'more useful'. Lastly, the low broken hills of Nupe are ferruginous, and on their slopes iron ore is mined by the natives.

VEGETATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES

137 The geographical position of Nupe country makes it a typical area of transition from the southern forest belt to the arid savannahs of the north. Narrow strips or patches of thick rain-forest-like vegetation accompany river valleys and watercourses; but then, inland, we find a country of thin forest, shrub, and 'orchard-bush', alternating with beautiful open park-land, such as round Bida and Agaie, where intensive cultivation has cleared bush and shrub. The plant-life, again, reflects the geographical position of Nupe midway between north and south. Nupe is one of the northernmost countries in which the oil-palm is found, and yam and the southern variety of maize are cultivated; it is, at the same time, the southernmost habitat of the date-palm, the shea-nut tree, and millet crops. The trees and plants which are important for Nupe production and diet are these, in the order of importance. In the drier inland areas we find the locust-bean tree (*Parkia filikoidea*), in Nupe *lonci*; the shea-nut tree (*Bassia Parkii*), *koci*; the indigo tree or vine (*Lonchocarpus cyanescens*), *eci*, and indigo grass (*Indigofera arrecta*), *tsentse*; baobab (*Andansonia digitata*), *kuci* or *kuka*; silk-cotton tree (*Malvaceae*), *lembubu*; date-palm, *dobina*; and finally the mango, *mangoro*, a European importation. On irrigated land and in the thick groves near watercourses grow the oil-palm and other, less important, varieties of palm-trees, kola-nut tree (*Sterculia acuminata*), *ebi*, and banana, *yaba*. Only the kola-nut tree, the mango, and partly the banana are cultivated, all other trees growing wild. Nupe cultivation comprises the following 241 kinds of crops and edible plants and roots: three millet varieties, bulrush-millet (*Pennisetum*), *mayi*, 'late millet' (*Spicatum*), *kpayi*, and guinea-corn (*Sorghum vulgare*), *eyi*; yam, *eci*; cassava, *rogo*; maize, *kábà*; ground-nuts, *guzya*; rice, *jenkafa*; sugar-cane, *kpàsanako*; and onions, *lubasa*, in the river marshes; further sweet potatoes, *duku*; beans and ground-beans, *ezo* and *edzu*; red pepper, *yaká*, and various kinds of greens which are eaten as vegetable. Of plants utilized commercially and in native industry cotton, *lulu*; henna, *lali*; hemp, *rama* or *egba*, 'rope'; and gourds, *ero*, are the most important.

241 In this enumeration of crops and plants of Nupe we have left the field 177 of physical environment in the narrow sense. This rich and varied system of cultivation reflects already a standard of civilization, technical achievement, and inventiveness of a people which has learned to master its environment. Some of the plants and crops mentioned have been adopted comparatively recently and introduced into Nupe from the north and south. As the Nupe names for hemp, henna, or cassava are borrowed from Hausa the plants themselves represent 'borrowed' cultural goods. The cultivation of onions was introduced into Nupe from

LANGUAGE

197 Nupe belongs to the Larger Unit[3] of Kwa languages of West Africa, which also includes the languages or dialects spoken by the Igbira, Igala, Idoma, and other peoples dealt with in this volume of the Ethnographic Survey.[4]

The Nupe Dialect Cluster together with those of Igbira and Gbari[5] make up the Nupe Language Group. But the Nupe are not linguistically homogeneous or exclusive. The bi-lingual Gbari of Paiko and Lapai also speak Nupe, while some of the split-off sections and colonies of Nupe have lost their native tongue. The Kakanda are said to speak a closely related language which may be a Nupe dialect. Although Gbari is a separate dialect cluster of the Nupe Language Group much of its vocabulary is identical with Nupe, which also has a close structural resemblance to both Gbari and Kakanda.

The Nupe cluster consists of five markedly different dialects: Nupe proper; Ebe, spoken by the Ebe sub-tribe; Zitako or Dibo, more closely related to Gbari; Kupa, spoken by the Kupa and Cekpan sub-tribes; Basa-Nge, spoken by the Basa-Nge, a split-off section. The Gbedye sub-tribe are said to have spoken a separate dialect which is now lost. Nupe proper is spoken by the Kyedye sub-tribe and others and there are only insignificant dialectal differences between the areas where it is spoken. Bida Nupe ("higher Nupe") exhibits a fondness for Hausa words and phrases which have replaced many Nupe words. The other four dialects differ con- [191] siderably from each other and from Nupe as spoken in the rest of the country, but most of the speakers of these dialects are bi-lingual and also speak Nupe proper.[5a]

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

133 The Nupe country is low-lying and undulating, not more than 200 ft. above sea level in most parts. A few ridges of rocky hills and some flat-topped hillocks rise above the plain; the highest of these are not more than 800 ft. above sea level. On the banks of the Niger there are stretches of thick riverain forest alternating with shrub and low bush. During the rains, the forest-covered banks and the open bush are flooded far inland and become vast swamps.

The Niger and the Kaduna Rivers form the two axes of the country. A network of smaller rivers and creeks, rich in fish, provides an efficient system of natural irrigation. Upstream from Jebba Island the Niger is narrow, with rapids and dangerous rocky passages. Between Jebba Island and Baro it is broad and navigable for big steamers for half the year.

● 134 The soil is mostly rich and fertile, especially in the thinly populated districts to the west of the Kaduna River. Round Bida town fertility has been much reduced by over-cultivation. The soil consists of red earth mixed with laterite and is rich in silicates. There is some iron ore which is mined by the natives on the slopes of the low broken hills.

137 The vegetation is typical for an area of transition from the southern forest belt to the northern savannah. Narrow strips or patches of thick forest vegetation lie in the river valleys and watercourses; inland, thick forest, shrub, and orchard bush alternate with open parkland, except round Bida and Agaie, where it has been cleared by intensive cultivation. There is virgin forest west of Kaduna.

Nupe country is the most northern area for oil-palm, yam, and the southern variety of maize; it is at the southern limit for date-palm, shea-nut, and millet. Other trees are: locust-bean, indigo, silk-cotton, mango (a European importation), kola-nut, and banana.[6]

[3] Westermann and Bryan, 1952, pp. 85–6. Their terminology is used here.
[4] See below, pp. 85–185.
[5] To be dealt with in a forthcoming volume of the Survey.
[5a] Nadel, 1942, pp. 12–14, 18, 23, 122; 1940, p. 165; Westermann, 1935; Meek, 1925, p. 137 (and map); Temple, 1919, pp. 113, 117, 220 324.
[6] Nadel, 1942, p. 1; 1940a, p. 194.